

# Learning Centre Roles in Facilitating Learning Communities at the Tertiary Level<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Tertiary learning centres are generally considered as having the primary function of teaching students how to be most effective in their learning and performance so as to achieve success in their courses of study. Instruction provided by such centres are delivered through group work (courses, workshops), one-to-one work, and through materials that come in the form of print and electronic resources. What is often not well known is that the success of such centres in meeting student learning needs depends considerably on the development of effective learning communities within the tertiary institutions where these centres operate. Important features of such learning communities include students who are active (rather than passive) participants in the development of their learning capabilities, students helping each other, faculty and departmental staff who are actively involved in the development and provision of support mechanisms to cultivate desired student skills, and effective communication channels that allow instructors to learn as much from their students as the students learn from them. This paper examines some of the ways in which staff working in learning centres can contribute to the development of these learning communities. Specific examples are drawn from activities and programs provided by the Student Learning Centre at the University of Auckland. The ways in which the success of many of the Centre's activities and programs depend on these learning communities, and the measures used to assess the impact of these programs on student performance, are discussed.

## Learning communities in brief

The essence of a learning community is that all of its members acquire new ideas and take responsibility for making sure the organization works (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). In the tertiary education environment, a learning community can be defined broadly as "a subgroup of learners from a larger cohort, who work[ed] together with a common goal to provide support and demand for group commitment and collaboration" (Davies, Ramsay, Lindfield, & Couperthwaite, 2005, p. 615). There are different forms of learning communities. The learning communities that Edwards and McKelfresh (2002) described, for example, were "living learning centers" which were structured, highly involved residential colleges that included classes and teaching staff living arrangements. In contrast, Knight, Dixon, Norton, & Bentley (2004) had a broader, less structured view: their references to a learning community basically pertained to a school and the wider community of professionals it linked with via videoconferencing.

Levine (1998, n.d.) acknowledged that there is a debate about what exactly constitutes a "learning community". She referred to the five models (i.e., linked courses, clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies) that Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) put forward, and noted that more recently these authors had reduced their model categories to three: paired or clustered courses, student cohorts in larger classes, and team-taught programs. Paired or clustered courses, the

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simplest of the models, involve students enrolling in two courses – one usually being a content course, while the other is usually a course focused on skills development. In such arrangements, instructors usually teach their courses individually, but work with each other prior to and during the semesters to ensure there is cohesion in what the courses cover, the readings provided, assignments, and so on. Student cohorts in larger classes, the second of the models, involve small groups of students from larger classes meeting weekly in a seminar. The seminar groups, which in some cases are facilitated by a teaching staff member, provide opportunities for students to build connections with each other and in what they are doing in their courses. Team-taught programs, the most complex of the three models, are also known as co-ordinated studies programs. These involve small groups of students and teaching staff members from several subject disciplines in co-ordinated interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Some such programs require full-time teaching staff and student involvement, such as the living learning centres arrangement Edwards and McKelfresh (2002) described.

### **The relevance of learning communities in meeting tertiary student needs**

Although about 15 to 25% of tertiary level student attrition can be attributed to academic failure (Tinto, 1993), other reasons such as difficulties in adjusting from high school to university, social isolation, and external pressures and obligations (e.g., family, health, financial issues, job demands) together account for a much larger proportion of attrition (Astin, 1993). Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002) referred to the variety of measures that tertiary institutions have used (e.g., summer bridging programs, special courses and seminars for first year students, mentoring programs, learning communities) to reform undergraduate education and foster better retention and outcomes for students, and noted the similar components in these. All such programs have been developed to address the needs of new students, which include integration into the campus community, formation of social networks, and establishment of academic support mechanisms. Hence, in a way, they all involve the creation of “communities” to provide various forms of support to students so that they can more effectively get on with learning in the tertiary education environment.

Levine (n.d.) described some of the shared characteristics of successful learning communities. These characteristics include smaller, more intimate classroom environments to help avoid feelings of isolation that students are prone to in large, anonymous lecture settings. More opportunities exist for teachers and students to get to know each other better in smaller classes, and it is much easier for students to set up study groups with peers. Successful learning communities facilitate student socialization: students get more opportunities to interact with other students and hence reinforce attitudes, values, and behaviours that are appropriate for the tertiary setting and often associated with academic success. In such communities, students find it easier to ask questions, to speak in class, and to seek help from a teacher or from another student. Another important characteristic is that students in successful learning communities develop a sense of responsibility – not just for their own learning, but also for the learning that occurs within the community they belong to. These characteristics are basically the same as those described by Jones, Laufgraben, and Morris (2006) as being the means by which learning communities aim to improve the first year of tertiary studies.

Although it is important to note that there is evidence to show that structured learning communities are not uniformly beneficial for all students (e.g., Jones et al., 2006) and that difficulties (e.g., students not contributing equally, problems in communication and engagement with peers) can be encountered (e.g., Davies et al., 2005), the majority of the research literature on them points to good outcomes for students. Edwards and McKelfresh (2002), for example, found that a learning community in the form of a residential college was a significant factor in predicting retention and increases in grade point average (GPA) of male first year students. Lichtenstein (2005) reported higher persistence and grades of first year students in learning communities that appeared to provide a strong sense of community (i.e.,

where instructors were engaged in the program and approachable to students, and more apparent connections were established between the instructors, the subject matter, and the course organization). Browne and Minnick (2005) explained how it is possible to develop intellectual skills like critical thinking and moral reasoning amongst student participants in learning communities – without sacrificing GPAs, retention, and satisfaction. And Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002) found significant positive changes in motivation and cognitive strategy use as a result of undergraduate student participation in six-week summer semester learning communities. Hence, overall, the evidence points to learning communities having the capability of meeting tertiary undergraduate student needs.

### **Learning centres in brief**

Providing instruction and support to university students about effective study performance is a relatively new concept that has developed and become widespread only during the past several decades. Prior to this, the prevalent view amongst administrators and teaching staff in tertiary institutions – especially in universities – was that students who reached this level of education should be able to largely manage their learning processes on their own. Students were basically expected to “sink or swim,” as well as to use a trial-and-error process in developing any necessary skills to cope with the demands of their courses. Matters relating to student performance, such as success rates and retention, were not considered as important as universities then did not face the same pressures to operate in a more business-like manner or to demonstrate more transparent accountabilities for the ways in which they managed their resources (including their students).

The first tertiary learning centre in New Zealand was established at the University of Auckland in 1985. Over the next couple of decades – motivated by reasons like student retention, equal educational opportunities objectives, and so on – many more of the other tertiary institutions gradually established similar kinds of support provisions for their students (Tarling, 1999; van Rij-Heyligers, 2005). All of the eight universities in New Zealand, and almost all of the other tertiary institutions, now have a learning centre of some kind that provides instruction and support for their students. There is also an active national association of learning advisors,<sup>2</sup> with an annual membership subscription of around 160 at the time of writing this paper.

Most of the learning centres were initially established with a remedial focus, and most if not all of them have retained this focus to the present time. This means that a significant proportion of their work in teaching and supporting students is geared towards those experiencing problems or difficulties in their studies. There is, however, another aspect to the work of learning centres that is increasingly being seen as equally important: that of providing professional development to tertiary students. The provision of such professional development to students derives from two basic premises (Manalo, 2004). The first of these premises is that achievement of academic potential in tertiary level study requires the development of new skills – including crucial, generic skills (e.g., in writing, critical thinking, project management) that are usually not taught or dealt with by subject department teaching staff. The second is that most of these new skills have a life-long value and will prove useful to students in subsequent work and other settings outside of their tertiary institutions.

### **The ways in which staff in learning centres contribute to the development of learning communities**

There are three basic ways in which learning centres can be considered as contributing to the development of learning communities: (1) facilitating student acquisition of skills to enable them to operate well within the institutional environment, (2) facilitating the establishment of

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<sup>2</sup> The Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ); website: <http://www.atlaanz.org>

connections and strategic partnerships aimed at enhancing learning outcomes, and (3) working with departments and faculties in the provision of paired courses. All three means of contribution are congruent with the broader definition of learning communities as subgroups of learners from a larger cohort working together with common learning-oriented goals (Davies et al., 2005), and the notion that all members within such communities acquire new ideas and take their fair share of responsibility in ensuring that the communities they belong to work (Hiatt-Michael, 2001) – both noted earlier.

A key aspect of the day-to-day work of staff (learning advisors) in learning centres is teaching and advising students about skills they can use to become more effective in their studies. These skills include not only cognitive and self-management skills (e.g., memory, critical thinking, time management, motivation), but also communication and other-management skills (e.g., the full range of writing skills, oral presentation, assertiveness, study groups). As a learning advisors responding to a survey wrote: “I ... coach students to ask for more feedback on assignments; to question, question, question if they don’t fully understand; to ask – if they receive a B– where the other marks went” (Manalo & Trafford, 2006). These communication and other-management skills are important because they not only help build student confidence, but also increase their competence in effectively operating within the institutional environment. As a consequence, students are more likely not only to acquire new ideas (i.e., learn as they are meant to – with fewer if any of the unnecessary barriers to such learning, like miscommunication, misinformation, and misunderstandings) but also to accept responsibility for their own learning as well as for the effective operation of the “smaller groups” or “communities” they belong to (e.g., their study groups, their tutorial groups, their circle of friends). Perhaps more importantly, such skills will prove useful even after students complete their studies and need to operate in new communities such as their subsequent places of work.

Learning centre staff members also facilitate the establishment of connections and strategic partnerships aimed at enhancing learning outcomes. These connections include both student-student and student-staff partnerships. Study groups that learning advisors help with or advise on establishing are a good example of the former. Workshops that learning centres provide also usually include exercises in which students work and/or discuss pertinent issues with other students – in pairs, in small groups, and in plenary. Such exercises not only allow students to help and learn from each other, but also provide introductions for students to get to know other students (who they may not otherwise get to know) and to establish social networks and friendships that are important to their general well-being.

The means by which staff in learning centres help establish student-staff partnerships may not be so obvious. A good example of such facilitation is when a learning advisor provides advice to a student about approaching a lecturer to seek help or ask questions about their course materials. There are both effective and not-so-effective ways of approaching lecturers for such purposes. For example, expressing something bluntly like “I can’t understand any of the materials we have covered in lectures” is likely to put most lecturers off as not only would it be difficult to decide where to start in attempting to help such a student, but the work that would appear to be associated with providing such help would seem enormous. In contrast, if the student concisely described to the lecturer what he or she has done and managed to learn thus far on the topic of concern (e.g., “I have gone over my lecture notes and the text material on the biological basis of memory, and I think I understand how long term memory basically involves growth of new synaptic connections ...”) and pin-point at least a starting point where he or she does not understand (e.g., “However, I really cannot understand the chemical processes that indicate repetition is necessary for the formation of long term memory ...”) then the lecturer is more likely to be drawn into a strategic partnership aimed at helping the student. The reason is that the lecturer would then be more likely to perceive the student as making a genuine effort and likely to benefit from the provision of assistance, and the work

associated with assisting the student would seem more manageable and potentially rewarding.

As noted earlier, a third way in which learning centres contribute to the development of learning communities is via the work they do with faculties and departments in providing paired courses. Paired courses in these cases involve a subject content course (e.g., in community nursing, business management, Japanese culture) provided by the department, and a skills development course (e.g., in critical reading, report writing, research design) provided by the learning centre. With such arrangements, the department/faculty staff who teach the content course and the learning advisors who teach the skills development course work closely prior to and during the semester to ensure that the instructions provided are cohesive and likely to promote the desired learning outcomes in the students who take these paired courses.

### **Some examples from the University of Auckland Student Learning Centre**

The Student Learning Centre (SLC) at the University of Auckland provides numerous intensive courses for students aimed at improving their academic performance. Such intensive courses exemplify one of the means by which learning centres facilitate student acquisition of skills to enable them to operate better within the institutional learning community.

*Puawaitanga*<sup>3</sup>, one of the intensive courses offered by the University of Auckland SLC, is aimed at assisting students who have failed more than half of their courses in the previous year develop the skills necessary for a better academic performance. The course, which is conducted prior to the start of the first semester, is 4 or 5 days in duration and deals not only with writing, learning and exam skills topics, but also self- and other-management skills, “knowing the system” (i.e., what students need to know about how the university operates that could be helpful toward their achievement of success), and support mechanisms available within the institution (from counselling and financial advice, to library services and computer support). Students are also encouraged to set up study support groups and to stay in contact not only with each other but also with learning advisors from the Centre (who also organise follow-up sessions during the semesters). The course therefore provides students with better strategies for managing their studies, and improves their integration within the university learning community. Students get to ‘see’ how it is possible for them to succeed and how they can take greater responsibility and play a more active role in instigating that success. A crucial component of that responsibility and the active role it entails is an understanding of how they (the students) are parts of many learning communities – from the study support groups they establish to the wider institutional learning community – all of which can provide invaluable support and at the same time require active input from them to work well. Manalo, Wong-toi, and Henning (1996) reported on the significantly higher subsequent pass rates of students who have participated in the course compared to a randomly selected group of students in the same situation (i.e., failed more than half of their courses in the previous year) who did not participate in the course.

As explained in the previous section, learning centres facilitate the establishment of connections and strategic partnerships aimed at enhancing learning outcomes. A good example of one of the ways in which the SLC does this is by matching students through its Language Exchange Program (described by Dey, 2005). The program matches students of complementary language skills/needs: thus, for example, a native English speaker student enrolled in a Chinese language acquisition course could be matched with a Chinese student who wants to improve his or her English language skills. Language skills facilitators at the Centre carefully select students (who have requested an exchange) for matching, arrange the initial meeting, provide instruction and advice to them on how to make the language exchange work, and periodically monitor the progress that they make. A recent development of this

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<sup>3</sup> The name of the course is derived from Maori, and means “blossoming.”

program has been to extend it so that students can not only exchange languages but also other academic skills (e.g., computer skills for essay proofreading skills).

The Language Exchange Program also provides a daily 2-hour conversation practice class for students. The classes are facilitated by tutors who supply topics (often in consultation with the student participants) to facilitate conversations and assist the students in resolving or clarifying any questions or uncertainties relating to conversations in the English language. The classes are very popular with students and there are always cohesive groups of students who participate regularly or semi-regularly and organise social activities (e.g., picnics, going to the movies) outside of the classes. Whenever space permits, non-students such as parents or spouses of students in the university are admitted to participate in the classes. Thus, the learning community that the program helps in establishing extends beyond the formal members of the institution. This extension of services to “significant others” of students of the university has numerous obvious benefits – not least of which is the resulting better integration of the students themselves and their families, most of whom are new or recent immigrants, or international students.

Many of the SLC’s postgraduate courses include “supervisor management” components. These cover issues such as clarification of expectations, establishment of regular meeting times and modes of communication, preparation for and conduct during supervisory meetings to ensure productivity, record keeping, and so on – all of which are within the student’s capability to manage effectively (see Manalo & Trafford, 2004). Teaching students how to better manage their thesis/dissertation supervisors/supervision helps in the establishment of more effective student-staff strategic partnerships. Many of the commonly encountered problems such as misunderstandings and miscommunications can be avoided, and both students and supervisory staff involved are more likely to see the mutual benefits of the partnership succeeding and hence work harder towards such end. Manalo (2006) described the better retention and completion rates of EAL (English as an additional language) students who participated in thesis preparatory courses which included supervisor management components.

Examples of the SLC’s “paired courses” include its Business Communication Skills Development program provided in conjunction with the Faculty of Business, and its Statistics Support program which is provided in conjunction with the Statistics Department. Trafford (2001) described the former which includes the provision of orientation courses and skills development workshops for students of the Faculty. The courses are prepared in close consultation with staff of the Faculty and are aimed at addressing identified student needs. SLC staff involved in the program also work with Business Faculty staff on such matters as provision of assignment feedback to students, and one-to-one instruction and support to aid students in the development of particular skills and overcome associated difficulties that are encountered (e.g., in writing assignments, presentation of seminars, etc.).

The Statistics Support program operates in a similar manner: the SLC provides workshops and one-to-one support for students enrolled in Introductory Statistics courses provided by the Statistics Department. The SLC co-ordinator (and main instructor) of the program is also employed as a tutor in the Statistics Department – hence, she is knowledgeable in both the subject matter of statistics and in skills required for more effective learning and exam performance. As Manalo and Leader (in press) noted, the significantly higher pass rates of students who also participate in the SLC provided workshops highlight the positive results that can be achieved when subject departments and centrally provided support facilities collaborate well in addressing student academic needs. The SLC workshops enable students

to take full advantage of the high quality teaching delivered through the Statistics Department<sup>4</sup> via the provision of further opportunities for revision, reflection, questioning, clarification, skills development, practice, and the like. Hence a more connected and enhanced teaching and learning environment is created (cf. Levine, n.d.).

### **Success and the importance of learning communities**

Jones et al. (2006, p. 263) pointed out that evaluation of learning communities is “not only important but needs to address the issue of measurable impact.” In the previous section, the measurable impact (e.g., significantly better student pass rates, retention rates, completion rates) of some of the programs the SLC provides which contribute to the establishment of effective learning communities has been noted. Being able to demonstrate measurable impact is crucial as it provides tangible proof of the added value that the development of learning communities brings to tertiary institutions and the people within them – staff and students alike. Evidence of measurable impact aligns programs better with institutional aspirations. It is, for example, far more desirable to be able to demonstrate significant gains in motivation and cognitive strategy use amongst students who participate in initiatives provided, as Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002) did where their summer semester learning communities were concerned, than to simply create screeds of documents listing such graduate attributes (without the associated evidence of impact).

It needs to be stressed that the success of institutional learning centres in meeting student learning needs depends considerably on the development of effective learning communities within the tertiary institutions where these centres operate. Without the establishment of effective learning communities in which students could operate, much of the desired improvements in student performance associated with the work of such centres would be impossible. For example, students could be taught business writing methods and statistics skills, but in isolation from the courses provided in the respective departments where these methods and skills need to be applied, such instruction would lack the necessary authenticity and relevance – and hence likely to fail in promoting integration and application of acquired knowledge (see Fink, 2003, about the ways in which significant learning occurs). Likewise, English conversation skills could simply be taught devoid of class participation, interaction, and cohesion, but such an approach would not only render learning much less enjoyable for participants (and there is evidence to show that enjoyment mediates student perceptions about the ease with which they could use new skills – e.g., Cheung & Sachs, 2006) but it would also deprive them of crucial practice in actual conversation.

As described in the previous two sections, some of the important features of learning communities that learning centres help in establishing within tertiary institutions include students who are active (rather than passive) participants in the development of their learning capabilities, students helping each other, faculty and departmental staff who are actively involved in the development and provision of support mechanisms to cultivate desired student skills, and effective communication that allows instructors and students to establish beneficial strategic partnerships with fewer of the often encountered problems of misunderstandings, misinformation, and miscommunication. These features are congruent with previously described characteristics of successful learning communities (e.g., Jones et al., 2006; Levine, 1998, n.d.). They can also be considered as good indicators of environments in which effective, significant learning can thrive: studies on collaborative learning, for example, indicate cognitive processing and task performance benefits (see, e.g., Shirouzu, Miyake, & Masukawa, 2002).

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<sup>4</sup> The Statistics Department team that teaches the Introductory Statistics courses won a national Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award in 2003; see the *New Zealand Qualifications Authority* website: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/for-providers/awards>

## Conclusion: Where on the journey are we?

Jones et al. (2006, p. 249) expressed the purpose of learning communities simply as being “to strengthen and enrich students’ connections to each other, their teachers, and the subject matter they are studying.” This paper has explained the relevance of learning communities in meeting tertiary student needs, and focused on the ways in which learning centres contribute to the development of learning communities, providing examples drawn from the programs offered by the SLC at the University of Auckland where the present author works. These learning centre provisions help students develop the necessary skills to enable them to operate effectively in the learning community that their institutions provide; they facilitate student-student and student-staff connections and strategic partnerships; and they make possible the significant benefits to student performance that paired courses can deliver. In essence, the contributions that learning centres make to the development of learning communities are very important in promoting the attainment of the very purpose of those communities. As Davies et al. (2005) pointed out, when learning communities experience problems, they often revolve around issues like students having problems in communicating and engaging with their peers – the very issues that learning centres and their staff can help avoid or resolve, as described in earlier sections of this paper.

However, it is important not to paint too rosy a picture of learning centre capabilities here. In reality, despite their potential for significant contributions to the attainment of institutional aspirations in student performance, many obstacles are encountered that often make it difficult to achieve much of that potential. For example, as Manalo and Trafford (2006) found in the survey they undertook, there is considerable discrepancy in the employment conditions of those who work in the learning advisor profession. Relatively poorer employment conditions (e.g., in comparison to regular subject department academic staff) often make it difficult to attract the best and most suitable individuals to learning centre posts. Most centres are also poorly resourced, and little or no time can be devoted to gathering the necessary data for demonstrating “measurable impact,” let alone write the reports on such impact. As one respondent expressed via the same survey that Manalo and Trafford conducted:

I see myself, at the moment, as the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, the tyres are punctured and I’ve nearly run out of band-aids!! ... I am the only learning advisor at my regional campus with a growing number of courses – some held some distance away – and all of this has to be done in one day a week.

In answer to the question posed in the heading of this section: we are making good progress on the journey but we are certainly a long way off from reaching our destination. Learning centres can, and do, make important contributions to the development of effective learning communities within tertiary institution settings, as the examples provided in this paper from just one such centre illustrate. However, factors such as poor resourcing and adverse work conditions often make it difficult for learning centres to achieve their potential – or “reach the destination of the journey.” Perhaps a positive take on this would be that experiences and achievements along the way are often considered more important than the actual journey’s end. In view of the increasing tangible evidence about the valuable impact that learning centres make to the academic performance of tertiary students, the journey thus far can be considered worthwhile and definitely on the right track.

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